

Harry S. Truman's UFO Americana

Written by Larry W. Bryant

Wednesday, 29 July 2009 22:59 - Last Updated Thursday, 30 July 2009 00:47

If you can judge by the various letters written to him by citizens during his terms in office, President Harry S. Truman truly was "The People's President." And nowhere is this judgment more apropos than when you consider the letters sent his way by persons convinced that the subject of "flying saucers" deserved his direct, serious attention.

The collected letters -- or at least that portion that somehow escaped referral to the Department of Defense for reply -- now reside at the Truman Library in Independence, Mo. There, they share the shelves with such missives as (1) citizens' requests that Truman lift the embargo on arms shipments to Palestine; (2) a women's group's telegram seeking a personal interview with Truman to discuss the status of proposed legislation aimed at setting up a U.S. Customs Border Patrol so as to improve the enforcement of antismuggling laws in relation to narcotics; and (3) parents' pleas that their sons be released from military prison so they can rejoin their families.

Amidst that potpourri of issues and concerns major and minor to a president who united the nation during wartime transition, what's so special about the correspondence on things that go swish in the night? For one thing, Truman might have been the only president ever to have received a formal briefing on the "UFO problem" from Air Force intelligence experts -- if you can accept that revelation as voiced in a 1956 book by former USAF "Project Blue Book" chief Edward J. Ruppelt.

For another thing, Truman resided in the White House during the famous UFO-sighting "flap" near Washington, D.C., back in 1952. Third, it was Truman who was instrumental in establishing the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, which to this day insists on denying public access to some 57 of the UFO-related documents that surfaced some years ago via litigation under the U.S. Freedom of Information Act.

Then there are the letters themselves -- a cross-section of views, concerns, suggestions, and explanations about a problem so touchy (and sometimes zany) that only a few citizens dared confide in their president. Lucky for them (and him), in retrospect, that this man Truman was so attuned to the American psyche that he was able to weather the growth of UFO interest with just the right mix of detachment and solicitude. (Maybe his approach has served ever since as the model for presidential response to the UFO problem.)

Although most of the letters wound up being referred to the Defense Department (Air Force) for

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direct reply to the writer, a few did Remain in the White House files. Apparently, each of them underwent indexing upon arrival -- under the writer's name, address, and date. A White House staffer synopsised each letter in a cross-reference log. Here are some excerpts quoted from the log; for most entries, I've added a commentary from my perspective as an historian of the "politics Of UFOlogy":

Pioneers Petition the President

Kenneth Arnold of Boise, Idaho (4/6/48): In a telegram, the man whose UFO encounter of June 24, 1947, sparked the coinage of "flying saucers" as a household word had this advice for Truman: "Your Honor, I understand there is enough evidence on hand by our intelligence and the people of your great country to announce that flying disks, flying saucers and other reported strange missiles that are being seen by reliable people throughout the world daily are aircraft from outer space. You know we are not making or flying these aircraft and the United States is the most scientific nation on earth. Why should not America be at least the first to announce this great discovery?"

Although the White House never acknowledged the telegram, Arnold felt obliged to communicate once more: on Dec. 13, 1951, he sent a copy of his booklet "The Flying Saucer as I Saw It." At the time of the telegram, he was 31 years old. He died in January 1984 -- never to see the resolution of a public issue that rages on throughout the world.

* * *

Meade Layne of San Diego, Calif. (4/7/50): Writing as the founding director of Borderland Sciences Research Associates, this True Believer in extraterrestrialism announces: "It is our earnest hope that, as a matter of public interest and policy, you will find time to examine the enclosed booklet. It is not necessary to point out to your Excellency that an extremely difficult situation may develop at any hour, in connection with the phenomena referred to in this booklet.

"Allow us to assure you that we serve no selfish interests in this matter, and stand ready to comply with any request for information or service which may be in our power to give."

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The 38-page booklet, which remains part of the Truman papers, is titled "Flying Discs -- The Ether Ship Mystery and Its Solution." This hodge-podge of metaphysical discussion and interpretation on the origin, purpose, and scope of the reported flying saucers ended up being referred to the National Academy of Sciences. On May 1, 1950, the Academy's executive secretary wrote back to Truman's secretary, stating that Layne's organization apparently deals with phenomena outside the field of the Academy, and suggesting that if Layne's communication "is to be given serious consideration it be referred to some philosophical organization." With that, Truman's secretary, then William D. Hassett, sent this reply to Layne: "Your interest in making available to him [Truman] the enclosures which accompanied your letter is very much appreciated and you may be sure they will be given careful attention."

* * *

Leon Davidson of Arlington, Va. (9/7/52): This tenacious, indefatigable prober-polemicist requested, as described by the correspondence log, "a list of the official statements or press releases made by the President, or the White House, on the subject of Flying Saucers since 1947. States if the statements are long, a mere reference to the date of issue would be sufficient." In later years, Davidson won fame for his persistence in prying loose from the Air Force a copy of its Project Blue Book Special Report No. 14, which he reprinted for wider distribution in a never-ending campaign to prove that most of the "saucers" were man-made, experimental devices. His persistence in going after CIA UFO documentation gave that agency heartburn long before its current headaches over the power of the Freedom of Information Act.

* * *

Robert Spencer Carr of Clearwater, Fla. (7/31/52): From the log: "Writer encloses miscellaneous material relative to 'flying saucers' -- suggestions for contact. Respectfully referred to the Department of the Air Force for appropriate handling."

It was Carr who, back in the early seventies, traveled the lecture circuit and radio talk-show route in a short-lived effort to convince the public that the government has all the information it needs about the saucers -- based on the USAF retrieval of crash-landed discs and some of their crew members. That contention thrives in some UFO-research circles today, of course.

The Roots of Official UFO Secrecy

Carr's fixation with retrieved saucers might have got its impetus from the notorious 1950 book by Hollywood columnist Frank Scully, "Behind the Flying Saucers," which was cited by a man in New Orleans (11/19/51).

From the log: "Requests President's comment re this. Threatens to publicize his letter if he does not receive an answer. Critical of the Pentagon. (consideration and appropriate handling.)"

* * *

Then there's a fellow from Cleveland (8/9/52):

"The writer relates a personal experience which happened in October, 1947, near Reno, Nevada, at which time he saw a formation of shining globular objects from which something, perhaps a parachutist, catapulted to the earth. He disapproves the theory of interterrestrial [sic] bodies and advances his theory that the source of these objects is Eurasia and suggests that they are being used as a means of enemy infiltration. Whatever the source, the writer feels that as full a disclosure as possible should be made by official Washington since these saucers may present a serious military threat about which the American public deserves to know."

* * *

Someone (gender unknown) from Waurika, Okla. (8/26/52), enclosed clippings: "One article [was] by a Navy officer who said he knew the location of a saucer but was not permitted to tell where it is as the United States and Mexico hid it. Also refers to article about a man In Florida who claims his hair was singed by a flying saucer. Would like an explanation regarding these articles."

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A man from Chicago (10/29/52) "refers to the Air Force report re Flying saucers as well as article by Robert S. Allen on this subject dated Sept. 26. States he does not believe that such matters should have to be investigated by private citizens. He hopes the secrecy of the Air Force will be lifted, etc."

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From Dinuba, Calif. (7/30/52), a man "urges that the Air Force inform the public as to the results of the investigation."

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Then, a woman from Tucson (7/28/52) "opposes the secrecy in re to the Flying Saucers. Believes the public should be given a complete report."

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Finally, from Baltimore (9/13/50): a man "refers to article entitled 'Flying Saucers' appearing in the October 1950 issue of Pageant Magazine, and feels the American people should be told the truth about the saucer reports. He asks if a cover-up attempt is being made on the part of the Air Force and Department of Defense."

Echoes of "The Roswell Incident"

One White House file-record sheet identifies letters from eight Separate persons -- all written during the time frame July 5 -- 9, 1947, which coincides with the reported crash-landing of a

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disc(s) near Roswell, N.M. (as recounted in the 1980 book "The Roswell Incident," by William L. Moore -- Grosset & Dunlap, New York; and thereafter in several other Roswell-focused books/articles/docudramas). Each of these letters was "respectfully referred to the War Department for consideration."

To Kill or Not to Kill

A woman (with others not named) from Los Angeles (7/29/52) requests "that the Air Force not fire on the 'flying saucers,' as they have not attempted any harm upon any persons or properties."

* * *

Likewise, another woman, from Ocean Park, Calif. (8/1/52), "opposes the recent order from the War Department to fire upon the 'flying saucers.' Gives her views re the 'saucers' and offers suggestions re same."

* * *

From Albany, Ga. (7/28/52), a man "urges the Air Force to refrain from attacking the so-called 'flying saucers.'"

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In her letter from Hollywood, Calif. (7/29/52), a woman "comments on reports of the so-called Flying Saucers and suggests they may contain highly intelligent humans and that an effort should be made to contact them in a friendly manner."

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Echoing that sentiment was a man from Indio, Calif. (7/30/52): "Referring to the report that our armed planes have been ordered to shoot down a flying saucer for investigation, the writer suggests that we had better cultivate the friendship of the space visitors and perhaps save ourselves from annihilation. Says that a friendly gesture would be supplied if the President were to issue a proclamation ordering our military and all private citizens to welcome space visitors and treat them with the utmost consideration should they choose to land among us."

* * *

For his part, an irate New Yorker (7/29/52) "requests by what authority, orders to shoot down the so-called 'flying saucers' were given – states that the makers and operators of these devices are vastly more powerful than the United States -- such orders would be equivalent to a declaration of war. Requests and urges President to immediately countermand these orders. States further, that unless he is informed promptly, that such orders have been countermanded, his letter will be given to the Press."

* * *

A telegram from a man in Glen Ellyn, Ill. (7/29/52), "suggests that no offensive action be taken against the objects reported as unidentified, which have been sighted over the nation -- (Flying Saucers) --offensive action might result in grave consequences -- alienating [sic] US from beings of far superior powers -- suggests friendly contacts."

* * *

But then we have the sentiments of a resident in The Green Killaloe, Co Clare, Eire, Ireland (6/22/52): "Writer states she read about Flying Saucers seen over New York. 'Don't be too easy with them, bring them down, show no mercy.' Comments that to make airplanes noiseless, cover their engines with felt and rubber."

Miscellany

The draft of this report contains too much material to include with this printing. Sections omitted here are titled "Inventors Invite Investigation" (several letters proposing this or that means for duplicating saucers' construction/propulsion); "UFO Curios" (referring to some 3-dimensional items sent to Truman); "The Theory File" (letters showing the wide range of citizens' theories on the origin/purpose of the saucers); "Words of Wisdom from the Children" (letters that show the sincerity -- and intensity -- of society's younger seekers of UFO knowledge).

Wanted: UFO Pen Pals

A male graduate student in journalism at the University of California (Los Angeles) (4/5/50) wrote this inquiry to Truman's secretary, Charles G. Ross:

"I am currently engaged in research for a graduate dissertation Which will attempt to analyze the sociological and psychological Implications of the flying saucer phenomenon.

"In the light of the forceful radio commentary by Henry J. Taylor and the article which appeared in the 'United States News and World Report, 'both of which declared or implied the saucers are aircraft of unusual design developed in the United States, I was interested to learn the reactions of Mr. Truman to the reports.

"I understand that the Navy and the Air Force have issued qualified denials to the reports. Does the White House feel such reports are baseless?"

"I wish to thank you in advance for your interest and help. You may be assured that I will appreciate any information you may be able to give me."

Ross's reply of April 11th contains what turns out to be form-letter phraseology from the Truman White House: "The president has expressed no opinions concerning these reports other than

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that he has no information of any kind about flying saucers."

And So It Goes...

Many of these UFO-oriented letters, of course, have something in common with the hundreds of other letters sent to any given president: the naive expectation that somehow the president himself not only will read them but also will respond to them. That form of faith in the paternalistic, omnipotent majesty of the Oval Office has carried over, for example, from the Truman days to the Jimmy Carter era of UFO awareness. Incidentally, the content of the Truman letters is echoed by the scores of UFO-related letters received by the Carter administration. Would Carter's staff have received far fewer such letters had Truman chosen to read his UFO-related correspondence and thus decided to transfer official UFO investigation from military hands to civilian control -- in an aim reflective of his move to assure civilian control of nuclear weapons?